

## **Transcript – MNB (E) Press Conference 11 May 2004**

Good morning and thank you for joining us.

My overall assessment of the situation in Multi-national Brigade-East is that we are making positive progress towards normalcy. While the violence of last March was a setback to some of the advancement of the past 4 years, I have witnessed the leaders and people of Kosovo take steps to gain back the momentum and move forward. Most municipal workers are back at work and the elected assemblies for the most part are back functioning. The soldiers of MNB (E) are conducting joint patrols with KPS and UNMIK-P further strengthening our working relationships towards providing security. It will take time heal the wounds of March but overall we are making headway.

Unfortunately several weeks ago our international partners with UNMIK-P came under attack. Two officers were killed, one was mortally wounded, and several others received injuries requiring medical attention. This tragic event touched not only those involved and their families, but all law abiding people here in Kosovo. Our continued thoughts go out to those officers and their families. I view this as an isolated incident involving only the international partners and as such should not be viewed as another setback for the people of Kosovo. After the incident MNB (E) was able to provide medical and emotional assistance. We were thankful we could serve our fellow international partners in their time of need. I want to thank Colonel Donald Harris, our medical commander, for the dedication to duty his soldiers displayed during this unsettling time, and Lieutenant Colonel Tim Peterson and his chaplain team for their assistance in grief counseling. It is our desire to never again see such a tragedy.

In sector we continue to monitor the overall security situation. The aftermath of the March riots is still with us. We have seen many instances where people of all ethnicities are trying to get back to a normal life, but there remains areas of tension. Many displaced persons have not returned home. Some displaced persons can't return since their homes are gone or uninhabitable. Some municipal and security employees have not returned to work or refuse to work alongside their multi-ethnic partners. Kosovo is a multi-ethnic society. The hopes for positive future rest with all peoples of Kosovo putting aside their differences and working and living together. I again call on the municipal leaders and citizens of Kosovo to take an active role in promoting a peaceful, positive future through multi-ethnic cooperation.

We did recently see good progress down in Kacanik where local KPS officers and members of the KPC joined with the international partners to carry out a large project and began replacement of the aging bridge along route Hawk. The cooperation between all partners and first-rate results of the bridge demolition not only are an economic lift to Kosovo but demonstrate that a common problem can be solved when all parties work together in unison. I want to thank Major Dave Skalicky, our Task Force Engineer for heading up the MNB (E) effort. He did a fine job as I knew he would.

Last week the United States military Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Richard Myers visited us here in Kosovo along with wife. We were excited to have them visit us here and it was a honor to be their host. But I think his visit didn't just raise the morale of the troops he addressed, re-enlisted or awarded, but also demonstrates to the people of Kosovo our determination and commitment to the mission here. This is the second time the senior military representative on the US military has visited Kosovo in

the past 8 months, during a time where we in the US military are engaged in other operations across the globe. For him to take the time from his busy schedule to visit us here in Kosovo and our forces in Bosnia again shows our commitment we to the NATO mission in Kosovo and for peace and stability in the Balkans.

Finally I want to recognize Lieutenant Colonel Kandogianis and the 525th Greek Mechanized Battalion. Only days after arriving in Kosovo they found themselves deep in the violence that struck throughout the province in mid-March. They performed their job well during those days and recently have taken back over their principal area of responsibility Ferizaj/Urosevac. I maintain my confidence in their ability to provide for a safe and secure environment and welcome the residents of Ferizaj/Urosevac in joining them in this important task.

I will now take your questions.

**Q: Mimosa Zajmi – RTK (Radio/Television Kosovo) - Unintelligible**

**Erlandson:** The KPC is a civil agency, during the riots we asked them if they would denounce the events as they took place on the 17 through the 19<sup>th</sup> March, our mission is “safe and secure” and we will not be doing any patrolling with the KPC whether it is during violence or peace. Some KPC were active in denouncing the violence during (the riots) and as a civil agency they have done a good job in assisting us and the people of Kosovo in the cleanup after the violence.

**Follow up Q: Mimosa Zajmi – RTK (Radio/Television Kosovo) - Unintelligible**

**Erlandson:** We have seen no indications in MNB (E) and to my knowledge, Kosovo, regarding terrorist threats. However when there is instability in the region like there has been in the Balkans as well as here in Kosovo, there is always opportunity for terrorists to infiltrate. Therefore, it is vitally important that we work with the KPS and all international agencies for stability throughout the Balkans and especially in Kosovo to eliminate or prevent any terrorist threat from ingraining itself in Kosovo.

**Q:** Almost in every meeting so far with journalists, you've had good words for the KPS. KPS is having more responsibility given to them. Is there any possibility that similar responsibilities will be given to the KPC as well?

**Erlandson:** I agree that the KPS is getting more and more professional each day, we continue to do joint patrolling with the KPS, and we work closely with them to help them become more successful each day. The KPC is organized as a civil agency to respond in the event of a natural disaster or emergency in Kosovo, and their participation in the demolition of the Kacanik bridge is a great example of how they too are getting better and better by helping in the demolition of that bridge as a civil agency. We work alongside them with any civil project or natural disaster in Kosovo to help them as a civil agency responsible for those kinds of things to do them successfully.

**Q: Reporter for Zeri newspaper (Pristina)**– On the threat of terrorism, our terrorism is also Albanian, (from Albania) due to the (unintelligible) with the United States and the war in Iraq, how much risk would be for Kosovars? The threat of terrorists to Kosovoars?

**Erlandson:** As I said earlier, we have seen no indication within Kosovo of terrorist or risks of terrorist acts occurring in Kosovo. We just don't see any indication of that; I'm unfamiliar with specifically what is going on in Albania. Although terrorism is a global problem, certainly I cannot say with one hundred percent surety that terrorist acts would not occur in Kosovo. At the present time we see no indications of terrorist activity or terrorism occurring throughout Kosovo.

**Q: Reporter for TV Liria (Ferizaj/Urosevac)** – Two days ago Amnesty International published a report about trafficking of women. In this report, there was indication that prostitution and trafficking of this sort... that KFOR soldiers were involved with this. What is your assessment?

**Erlandson:** Human trafficking is not unique to Kosovo it is certainly an international problem. Regarding the report itself, it seemed somewhat dated. The Kosovo task force of international police for human trafficking and prostitution has been very pro-active in fighting this kind of activity here in the province of Kosovo. We have taken several measures to ensure that our soldiers do not participate in these types of actions in Kosovo and I have seen no evidence that any of our troops are engaged in any unlawful activity involving prostitution and human trafficking.

**Follow up Q: Reporter for TV Liria (Ferizaj/Urosevac)** – This means that you’re saying the report is not valid?

**Erlandson:** No, I’m not saying the report is not valid, what I’m saying is that the report that I read seems somewhat dated. I want to re-emphasize that I have seen no evidence that our troops are engaged in any of this unlawful activity.

**Q: Reporter for – K-Serbian HERC TV (Strpce)** – You mentioned there are positive steps taken towards normalcy, have positive steps been taken towards solving the murder of the Stolic family in the (unintelligible) area of the municipality of Strpce? Because our police department in Strpce has no reports whatsoever and the case was taken over by the regional police station.

**Erlandson:** Regarding the two horrible murders of two Serb men within Strpce, we fully support the effort of KPS and UNMIK-P and its ongoing investigation into those murders. We worked together with the KPS and UNMIK-P a few weeks ago as we conducted a “cordon and search” that intelligence told us that these people may be impacting “safe and secure” in Strpce. Illegal weapons and other items were discovered and turned over to the UNMIK-P for investigation. In regards to the specifics of the investigation, that question should be asked of UNMIK-P.

**Q: Reporter for Bota Sot – Bajrush Morina (Pristina) - American** soldiers are more accepted, are more close to the community in Kosovo. I (unintelligible) if you can tell me, how are you doing this friendship relations between American Soldiers and the civilians, uh, I mean all of the communities of Kosovo, and to use this example for other soldiers and other brigades in Kosovo?

**Erlandson:** As you are aware, our soldiers, on a daily basis, engage the citizens of Kosovo as well as local municipal leadership and those people involved with local governments in Kosovo. This is one of the things that we do that we feel helps us connect with the people of Kosovo of all ethnicities and better understand some of the problems that they face and better enable us to provide a safe and secure environment. NATO is always looking for better ways to approach this mission in Kosovo, and they look at each of the multi-national brigades on a regular basis to find what is working in each of the multi-national brigades. And as NATO does that research and finds out what works well in one multi-national brigade or another, that information is passed to all multi-national brigades as a good technique or procedure and we will each assess that information on our own and anything that can make us better to provide a better safe and secure environment we're interested in learning about.

**Follow up Q: Reporter for Bota Sot –** Do you believe that these bureaucratic movements on the part of the UNMIK-Police are prolonging the investigation in the murder of the two Serbs in Strpce? Because last week there was a problem that happened between the two KPS officers in which one was Albanian and the other was Serb, as we

know there have been problems before within the administration between the Serb and Albanian workers there. Does the prolonging of the investigation effect the tension in relations in that municipality?

**Erlandson:** The UNMIK-P investigation – with an investigation like this as complex as it is, takes time. As I said before in my comments that there are still some areas of tension since the March riots. Earlier last week there was some tension between Kosovo-Albanian and Kosovo Serbian KPS. The regional commander for UNMIK-P got involved and I believe that the problem has been resolved at this point. Investigations of this nature take patience not only from all of us, but certainly the international community as well. Like the people of the Strpce municipality, I truly hope that the KPS and UNMIK-P can develop enough evidence to convict the perpetrators of this horrible crime.

Thank you very much.